

2013—East by Eastwest: Cultural Studies' Route to Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT In Eastern Europe, which is the focus of our study, different national scholarly traditions assigned their own place to the study of culture. Although the influence of the *kulturologia* ("culturology") schools installed at Russian universities in the 1980s radiated out into Eastern European countries, local academic communities dictated the approach to the study of popular culture. While the Polish field of *kulturoznawstwo* was propelled by internal forces from the early 1970s onwards, in Czechoslovakia, *kulturologie* emerged as a new discipline around the fall of the Communist regime. Even so, it failed to take off and by 2012 had vanished completely from the Czech Republic. Central European countries were also affected by the German academic tradition of *Kulturwissenschaften* with its emphasis on philosophy and aesthetics. Our inquiry highlights the first international conference on cultural studies in the Czech Republic in 2013. It was during this event that a group of new postdocs from Charles University, including ourselves, raised the topic of changes in Eastern European popular culture due to the political transformation in 1989. This group had also arranged for Ann Gray, the final director of the UK Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to give a keynote address at the conference, a gesture that clearly linked the CCCS with the group's own Centre for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPK) established three years earlier. From the outset, CSPK's organizers aimed to promote the Anglo-American tradition of cultural studies both in the academy and among the general public. At the same time, they sought to retain their independence from academic structures and funding systems that might restrict their political activism.

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Cultural studies has now spread worldwide as both an academic discipline and a general intellectual approach. A historical analysis, however, reveals the very diverse trajectories of this field of study outside the English-speaking world. Depending on national and regional academic traditions, the study of popular culture was incorporated into different disciplinary frameworks. In this essay, we first sketch the varied paths that the study of popular culture took in Eastern Europe. We will demonstrate how political and societal context can play a crucial role for the reflection and adaptation of cultural studies. While the academic reception of the approach represented by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was significantly delayed and problematic in Eastern Europe, the study of what was called the science of culture or culturology remained important in some of these countries. In others, ethnology, social and cultural

anthropology, cultural sociology, media studies, literary studies, and cultural history assumed responsibility for many of the research themes and questions addressed by Anglo-American cultural studies. Finally, in the last part of this study, we show an example of Czech cultural studies history over the last two decades, when a new generation of scholars struggled to overcome the post-socialist context that divided students of cultural studies across both national and disciplinary borders. We highlight 2013 as the year when the first international conference on cultural studies in the region was held in Prague because it marked the link to the already non-existent Birmingham Centre and a new shift towards networking and interconnecting scholars in cultural studies both within Eastern Europe and with the European academic world in general.

The Legacy of East European *Culturologia*

To contextualize the entering of Anglo-American cultural studies into Eastern European academic environment, we have to sketch out different legacies of the study of popular culture in this part of the world first. Even if national scholarly communities in Eastern Europe had their own approaches to the study of cultures, some countries shared a tradition of “a science of culture” that covered partly the themes approached by the Anglo-American cultural studies. Soviet schools of *kulturologia*, of which the best known was probably the Tartu-Moscow semiotics school established by Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, were installed at Russian universities in the 1980s and evolved into a broad but internationally isolated discipline in the 1990s. With its methodology based on a holistic theory and history of all culture with a strong structuralist background, this discipline was a long way from Anglo-American cultural studies. According to Maxim Monin, *kulturologia* and “Western” cultural studies were very distant paradigms because they were rooted in incompatible understandings of the relationship between culture and power.¹ While Western scholars saw culture as a field where power was rehearsed and exercised, Russian cultural theorists were inclined to view it as an autonomous sphere for the free and authentic expression of personal creativity. Monin points out that no Russian school would have accepted the Barthian death of the author. Moreover, since Russian culturologists focused on escaping the official Marxist-Leninist ideology, they did not fully understand Western criticisms of capitalist bourgeois culture. In contrast to the early CCCS’ engagement with analytical Marxism and later reconceptualization of Gramscian legacy by Stuart Hall in 1980s, Soviet “science on culture” sought to get over the Marxist-Leninist vocabulary with its all-encompassing subordination of culture to the Communist Party’s politics and thus to depoliticize the sphere of culture. In what are probably the best known examples of Soviet theories of culture – by Mikhail Bakhtin and by Jury Lotman —we hardly find any link to the political dimension of culture, or even to Marxist concepts. For both, the culture was an autopoietic system which was based on the dialogical principle of internal and external tendencies.

While the Russian *kulturologia* approach influenced other Eastern European countries, it was their own academic traditions that ultimately shaped their treatment of the study of culture. The Polish field of *kulturoznawstwo* had long been driven by cultural sociology, an influence that peaked in the 1960s when Zygmunt Bauman devised a new Marxist theory of

cultural practice that was inspired by Antonio Gramsci and coincided with the rise of cultural Marxism in the West.² This scholarly milieu gave rise to gradual establishment of the discipline *kulturoznawstwo* ("cultural studies") in the following decades. Grzegorz Dziamski has identified three generations of this Polish school.³ The first wave consisted of the founding fathers. Stanisław Pietraszko established the first department of cultural studies at University of Wrocław in 1972. Jerzy Kmita, who was the director of the Institute of Cultural Studies in Poznań (established in 1976), sought to develop this scientific discipline based on a universalist theory of the humanities in the 1970s and 1980s. With this approach, the first generation was successful in setting up the academic space for the cultural studies within late socialist Poland. In contrast, the second generation, which benefited from the new possibilities after the fall of communist regime, saw *kulturoznawstwo* as more of an interdisciplinary field that reflected the postmodern turn of the 1990s. Authors such as Wojciech Burszta and Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska opened the debate about the new position of *kulturoznawstwo* in the response to the cultural and other "turns" in humanities.⁴ Finally, the third generation of the 2010s questioned the ambiguous relationship of *kulturoznawstwo* to the political engagement of the last decade. Not surprisingly, the British tradition of CCCS played an important role in this critique. Arkadiusz Nyzio argued that one reason for CCCS's delayed reception in Poland was the prevailing "fear of politics" not only in the academy but also in public debates more generally.⁵ Although the academic journal *Kultura Popularna* had been published since 2002, an anthology of CCCS texts did not appear in Polish until 2012.⁶ In sum, even if the Polish variant of cultural studies has been established at universities and research institutes as a vital discipline it has just very scarcely reflected the political dimension of cultural studies and especially the Marxist debates within Western cultural studies until the recent decade.

In Czechoslovakia, *kulturologie* emerged as an academic field around the fall of the Communist regime, but it failed to advance over the next two decades. Scholars in the Department of Cultural Theory at Charles University in Prague, the only school devoted to *kulturologie* in Czechia, adopted a framework that reflected a rather anthropological notion of culture in the tradition of Leslie White. This Czech *kulturologie* aspired to be a unifying science of culture that would integrate biocultural explanations, a sociological model of sociocultural systems, and psychocultural concepts.⁷ While the sociological dimension of this complex schema included a version of cultural studies ("*kulturální studia*") that was used to research subcultures and countercultures, there was a conspicuous lack of reference to CCCS authors. Ultimately, almost all trace of this *kulturologie* approach would vanish from the Czech Republic with the closure of the Charles University department in 2012; only the periodical that the department established, *Journal of Culture*, survives today. In the Slovak Republic, on the other hand, two *kulturologia* departments remained active until 2020, when the school at Comenius University in Bratislava was shut down. The other department at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra has redirected its curriculum and research to the history, philosophy, management, and performance of the creative arts.

Eastern Inspirations across Disciplines

Nevertheless, themes and approaches of cultural studies have been much vividly reflected beyond the narrow borders of the *culturologia* discipline—in ethnology, cultural anthropology, history, and sociology in Eastern Europe. The cultural research tradition pioneered in Poland by Florian Znaniecki and developed by his compatriot Zygmunt Bauman found echoes in the post-socialist period in a discipline of ethnology. Starting in the 1990s, Polish ethnologists like Michał Buchowski showed a deep interest in the current local context of economic, political, social, and cultural transformations. Buchowski conducted fieldwork in rural locations in western Poland and linked this cultural research to a class-based analysis; the goal here was to capture a process of major asset transfer that was seen as extraordinary by scholars and insiders alike.⁸ Buchowski brought the same anthropological approach to the post-socialist period to his later collaborations with many Czech and Slovak ethnologists (for example, Zdeněk Uherek, Alexandra Bitúšiková, and Hana Červinková), which became key references for any cultural research in the region in this era.⁹ This disciplinary shift in cultural studies from sociology to ethnography also broadly corresponded with one happening in another nation—Croatia.

The Croatian discourse about post-socialist culture also drew on a strong local academic tradition, this time arising from the Yugoslav sociology of the 1970s and 1980s. In Croatia, which profited from its position between the Cold War blocs, cultural inquiries benefited especially from the relative openness to unorthodox forms of Marxism and the early translation and engagement with major CCCS authors and commentaries. In the 1970s, authors like Andrei Simić and Radomir Konstantinović probed the cultural realities of the rather abrupt urbanization process across Yugoslavia.¹⁰ By the mid-1980s, the emphasis had shifted to cultural anthropology as prominent critics like Ivan Čolović launched an analysis of Serbian nationalist campaigns based on Barthian semiotics.¹¹ During the wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Belgrade-based Čolović's approach was taken up by a new generation of Zagreb-based ethnologists. Their culture-based readings of the escalation of interethnic conflict into the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) produced studies that became internationally renowned.¹²

This new wave of Croatian ethnologists, including women researchers such as Lada Čale Feldman, Ines Prica, and Reana Senjković at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (IEF) in Zagreb, created seminal works of war anthropology. Their goal was to reflect the experience of individuals caught up in the war.¹³ In the words of Maja Povržanović Frykman, these texts aimed to analyze “cultural processes in the chaos of war,” and their focus on the impact on everyday life provided abundant input.¹⁴ The themes of these studies included the ethnicization of football match rivalries, the renaming of public spaces once dedicated to socialist heroes for figures from ancient Croatian history, the graffiti and iconography of soldiers and military volunteers, and the ethnography of anti-war protests. These cathartic texts by intellectuals trapped in difficult conditions recalled the efforts of another resilient generation that had attempted to deconstruct local culture in Austria in the 1970s and 1980s, in that case through creative works. However in contrast with Austrian writers like Elfriede Jelinek and Peter Handke or filmmakers like Ulrich Seidl or Michael Haneke, the Croatian war ethnologists did not simply oppose the dominant narratives by rejecting them altogether. Instead their strength lay in their quest to expose and explain the forces that had driven the inhabitants of a culturally advanced country into the barbarism of war.

In neighboring Slovenia, cultural studies drew on still different traditions.¹⁵ One of them was Lacanian psychoanalysis whose champion Slavoj Žižek became a global superstar. Another was phenomenology, and a third approach, represented by Peter Stanković and Mitja Velikonja, who both taught in the University of Ljubljana's social science faculty (*Fakulteta za družebne vede*, FDV), reflected CCCS and its interest in subcultures. In Slovenia as elsewhere, the punk subculture became a research focus and a model for similar inquiries into alternative lifestyle practices. Subcultures were, however, not the only target of CCCS-inspired studies. Other topics included the Slovene "neurosis" over European Union accession in 2004¹⁶ and the nostalgia across former Yugoslav states for the dissolved socialist federation.¹⁷ Around a decade later, the interest in combining cultural studies with Yugoslav-specific historical research bore fruit in the town of Pula in the Croatian part of Istria, a region united by its history of anti-fascist struggles. It was there that Igor Duda, Lada Duraković, Boris Koroman, and Andrea Matošević founded the Centre for Cultural and Historical Research of Socialism (CKPIS) at Juraj Dobrila University in 2012.¹⁸ Just two years earlier in the Serbian town of Niš in the southeast of the former Yugoslavia, cultural sociologist Predrag Cvetičanin had established the Center for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe (CECS). Where his Slovene peers reflected on their punk experience, Predrag Cvetičanin examined his own postpunk one though his research owed less to CCCS models than to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁹ These different approaches to cultural studies across the former Yugoslav states were reflected in the 2017 anthology *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and Its Other*.²⁰ Among other things, this volume confirmed that the scholarship arising from the former socialist federation had implications well beyond its one-time borders.

Nor can we overlook the Hungarian academic traditions that directly impacted on cultural studies in the region. Several Hungarian applications of cultural studies aligned with trends in scholarship in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This was particularly true of the work of László Kürti, who documented the Far Right mobilization of subculture groups in the last days of state socialism and its immediate aftermath.²¹ Both Hungarian and Czechoslovak researchers emphasized the role of popular and subcultural music scenes; in the Hungarian context, Anna Szemere's extensive work on these themes was especially notable.²² A Marxism-inspired approach to culture also animated the research of Judit Bodnár and Krisztina Feherváry, who both examined the material culture of post-socialist elites.²³ The pairing of cultural studies with contemporary history was, thus, particularly productive in Hungary. The collection *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies* (2011) also influenced developments across the border; a review of the book appeared in the first volume published by the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture.²⁴

In sum, with the notable exception of the former Yugoslavia, the reception of Anglo-American cultural studies was both delayed and controversial across the states of Eastern Europe. While the academic embrace of Westernization brought significant changes to the social sciences and humanities in the region in the 1990s, Western-style cultural studies was excluded or remained marginal. This was most likely because of the discipline's explicitly political engagement and especially its appeal to Marxist concepts and language, which challenged the post-socialist anti-communist comfort levels. Any version of Marxism was deemed suspicious and conflated with the rigidity of late socialist Marxist-

Leninist ideology. In Poland and Russia, the science of culture had arisen to oppose the official ideology and scholarship of the 1970s, and its scholars like Bakhtin and Lotman had cultivated their own universal theoretical frameworks. For their Czech and Slovak counterparts, the local institutionalization of a discipline with Marxist concepts at its core was simply not conceivable. In the former Yugoslavia, in contrast, scholars could connect more easily with the local variant of unorthodox Marxism, and their work also benefited from a relative openness to global developments in cultural theory.

Belated Journey to Cultural Studies in Czechia

Scholars who had spent time at universities in the West were the pioneers of cultural studies in the Czech Republic. In 2004, a special issue of *Czech Sociological Review* dedicated to the links between culturology, the sociology of culture, and cultural studies published the first Czech-language articles about CCCS cultural studies.²⁵ This issue included a study by Jiřina Šmejkalová, a literary historian of Czech origin at the University of Lincoln, who introduced Anglo-American cultural studies approaches to the Czech-speaking audience. This article described the disciplinary turn worldwide from the sociology of culture to cultural studies and noted that in studies of Eastern Europe, this discursive shift had not yet been realized. The trouble, Šmejkalová claimed, was that cultural studies was rooted in the same ideas that had prompted unsuccessful attempts at communist utopias in the region; these Marxism-influenced analyses seemed naive and unacceptable in the Czech post-socialist context. Czech cultural studies, she wrote, should therefore focus instead on the transformation of social life and the cultural sphere under the state socialist regime.²⁶ This issue of *Czech Sociological Review* that marked the first encounters with cultural studies within Czech humanities also referred to *kulturální studia*, a term newly defined in this context by sociologist Miroslav Petrušek.²⁷

Even if mostly unrelated to this debate in sociology, the same term would appear two years later in the title of the Czech translation of *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies* by Chris Barker.²⁸ The main instigator of the translation was Irena Reifová, a media theorist in the social science faculty at Charles University in Prague. Drawing on her experience as a researcher of contemporary media and particularly television content in the United Kingdom and Germany, she introduced diverse cultural analyses in her seminar. Reifová examined the role of ideology in Czech television series, documentaries, and reality shows, documenting specific national expressions of global media trends.²⁹

Media studies and journalism-based approaches not only helped establish cultural studies in Prague-based faculties; they were also instrumental to the discipline's placement on university curricula across the country where the translated Barker's dictionary found a new audience. At Palacký University in Olomouc, the focus on journalism and textual analysis led to the creation of an MA program in cultural studies in the journalism school of the faculty of arts in 2011. The turn to cultural studies, thus, changed the methodology of journalism training. At the same time, it also fostered pioneering works of comics studies by Martin Foret and others³⁰ and of fan studies by Iveta Jansová later.³¹ The Olomouc school was the first Czech academic department to support a large number of MA and

PhD theses devoted to Anglo-American media and theory and content as well. Around 2010, enthusiastic students in this new program also began publishing the online magazine *Konstrukt*, which viewed ongoing public controversies through a cultural studies lens. Unfortunately this publication only survived two years.³²

A crucial cause of the Czech institutionalization of cultural studies was the work of literary theorists in the faculty of arts at Charles University. Starting in 2005, Petr A. Bílek hosted a seminar in the faculty on topics including pulp literature and the opposition between art and popular culture. Bílek, who had spent some time as a visiting professor in the United States,³³ drew on literary theory and US studies of popular culture to analyze the narratives of contemporary Czech culture. He also produced a Czech translation of John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* in 2017.³⁴ His seminars were the starting place of many of the studies later collected in two volumes about popular culture under Czechoslovak state socialism.³⁵ Bílek went on to found a second Czech MA program in cultural studies; its base was at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice.

Finally, the academic interest in Czech subcultures gained important insights from British CCCS tradition. Starting in the 1990s, research on political extremism comprised both studies on punk-anarchist and far right-skinhead scenes. In this context the department of political science at Masaryk University in Brno produced several important scholarly publications under the leadership of Miroslav Mareš.³⁶ However, the paradigm of political extremism rooted in German political science (e.g., Uwe Backes' *Extremismustheorie*) narrowed the scope of research questions about the position and role of subcultures in society. Recent political studies on subcultures criticized these limits—among others—with references to the CCCS tradition of subcultural studies.³⁷ Furthermore, the research on subcultures has been scattered among anthropological and sociological departments at Czech universities. One of the first collection of essays that reflected British debate on subcultures and postsubcultures was published by Marta Kolářová in 2011,³⁸ and Hedvika Novotná and Martin Heřmanský offered important insights into postsocialist subcultures.³⁹

All of these academic efforts reflecting themes and concepts of Western cultural studies occurred independently during the 2000s with little or no common ground. By the end of this decade several young PhD students (including authors of this essay) came to the conclusion that there is a need to network these efforts and to bring the neglected part of the legacy of CCCS back into debate. Conceived as a grassroots organization that would shift between cultural theory and practice, the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPK) was established as a non-governmental organization in 2009. In their manifesto, its members wrote that popular culture deserved interdisciplinary analyses that would prompt more intense self-reflection in Czech society. Nevertheless, such efforts were all too rare. Popular culture was highly relevant politically, and there was a need to engage social scientists, students, journalists, and the general public in debate and collaboration on the contentious issues it raised.⁴⁰ The founders of the CSPK had background in modern and contemporary history and were conscious of the near absence of interdisciplinary approaches in their own discipline. It was for this reason that they directed their message at such a broad sweep of stakeholders. The center promoted diverse approaches that included academic standpoints often based on the CCCS tradition or Bourdieu's cultural

sociology, but they also addressed the public outside the academy. One topic that resonated widely and reflected the CCCS influence was subcultures and alternative scenes in general.

To attract the attention of the academic community, CSPK organized the first Czech conference on popular culture in 2011. The invitees were chosen to reflect diverse approaches to popular culture. Buoyed by this event's success, the organizers moved on to the next milestone for Czech cultural studies: to internationalize the scope within the postsocialist Eastern Europe. They organized a Central and Eastern European conference on the theme of changes in popular culture based on the political transformation after 1989/1990. This conference took place in 2013 in Prague and marked the very moment of crossing both different disciplinary approaches and East-West borderlines.⁴¹ Hoping to bridge the gap between Eastern European and Anglo-American approaches, the group invited Ann Gray, the last director of CCCS before its closure, to give a keynote address. In this way, the symbolic line between CCCS and CSPK was indicated. A second keynote came from Eric Gordy, a British expat and scholar of Southeastern European popular culture. As the first international conference in Eastern Europe to explicitly address the academic debate about applying Anglo-American cultural studies to the region and its recent history, it provided a platform for first debates overcoming national and disciplinary borders.

The conference that took place in Prague city center at National Museum, Ethnographical Museum – Músaion also revealed many new topics within regional cultural studies and so validated the thesis that this research framework could be productive outside its original Anglo-American context. As such, it affirmed that cultural studies was slowly but surely taking hold in this region and suggested some of its main themes and approaches. Among these research areas were media analysis, memory studies, youth studies, and especially subcultures and popular music scenes. The names of panels can reveal the breadth of the event, still focusing on popular culture in the given region and historical context: Ethnography of Post-Socialism, Memories and Imagination of Post-Socialism, Screens of Post-Socialism, Gendered Post-Socialism, To be Young in Post-Socialism, Soundtrack of Post-Socialism, and two panels on Post-Socialist Subcultures. Thematically, the papers comprised topics as gender and sexuality, comics and youth magazines, nationalism and national stereotypes, music, gastronomy, subcultures, and violence, which mirrored the debates about popular culture in the postsocialist context of this time period. Outcomes of the event included a collective monograph, *Popular Culture and Subcultures of Czech Post-Socialism: Listening to the Wind of Change*, and a special issue, "Popular Culture and Post-Socialist Societies in East-Central and South Eastern Europe," of the academic journal *Media Studies*.⁴² In addition, the conference integrated CSPK into a network of like-minded researchers in the region from Baltics to Austria to Bulgaria. It launched a line of similar events and international collaborations in which CSPK was a key initiator and facilitator. In the years since, the center has organized three international conferences on topics including East-West encounters, the rural-urban divide and the nature of the "mainstream" in the Eastern European popular culture. In 2017, CSPK was also one of the coorganizers of the European Popular Culture Association's annual conference, which brought nearly one hundred popular culture scholars from around the world to Prague. At a local level, the center's ten annual series of public lectures have introduced the public to

cultural studies and also nurtured student interest in the field. So far, CSPK's publications include various edited volumes and special issues of academic journals,⁴³ and its members convey its mission in their many media appearances.

Conclusion

In this study, we tried to excavate the history of Czech cultural studies through a survey of the situation in other Eastern European countries. We are aware that a detailed overview of all different attempts to engage with the broad and manifold legacy of cultural studies in Eastern Europe would need much more space. We have chosen this approach so as to indicate the barriers that conditions in post-socialist Europe imposed on the discipline's trajectory. In most of these countries, exchanges with the West were restricted by the Iron Curtain. In some cases, a strong domestic tradition of culturology or the science of culture evolved. However, even in the 1990s, Anglo-American cultural studies only made limited inroads. This was largely due to the discipline's roots in a Western-style Marxism that was at the very least suspicious in the post-socialist context. By the end of the millennium, cultural studies themes and approaches had surfaced in different academic contexts in the region but key scholars in the field were not incorporated into university curricula and publications until as late as the 2000s. It was only when post-socialist societies and academic institutions began critically reassessing not only their communist past but also the anti-communist discourses of the 1980s and 1990s that cultural studies became an invigorating source of debates among a younger generation of scholars. In the Czech context, this led to the creation of an independent network outside the academy that sought to revive the critical intellectual engagement with everyday social struggles as mirrored in popular culture. This network also sought to bring together academics from other Eastern European countries to challenge the hegemonic discourses of the post-socialist era and, at the same time, to open the space for mutual enrichment with the legacy of Western cultural studies.

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